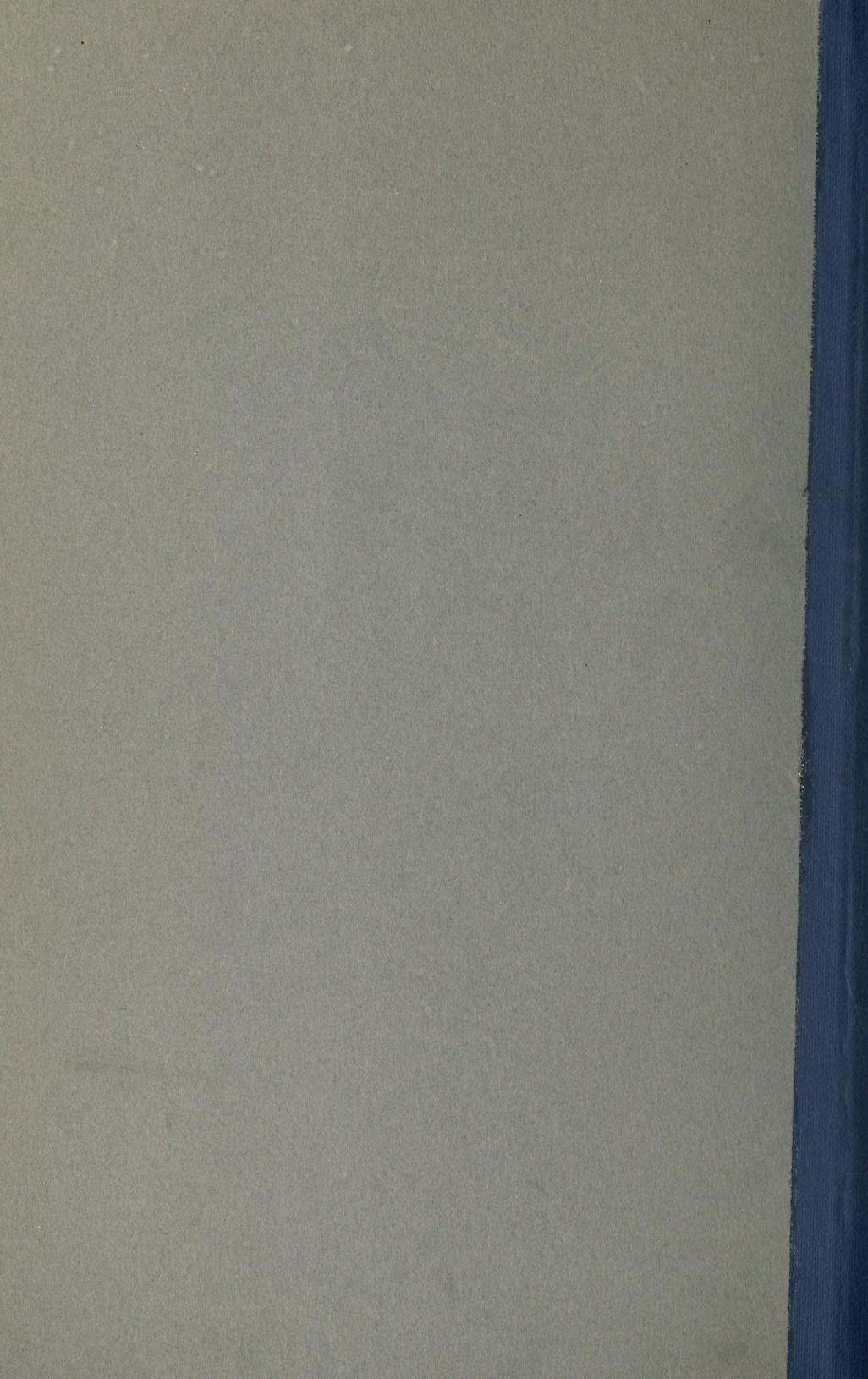


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[Robinson, (Sir) Harry Perry]

A war correspondent on his work.







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A WAR CORRESPONDENT

ON HIS WORK

by

Sir Harry Perry Robinson

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[Extract from the Nineteenth Century,

December, 1917]

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1917

Robinson, (Sir) Harry Perry



A WAR CORRESPONDENT ON HIS WORK

THE public seems to have formed for itself two widely different pictures of the present-day War Correspondent. There are many people who figure us as breathless young men who dash about, presumably on horseback, among cannon and bursting shells and lines of cheering infantry, seizing and jotting down the impressions of the moment, then hurrying to the nearest telegraph office to send them red-hot to their respective journals. It is the traditional picture, composite of reminiscences of Russell, Archibald Forbes, and Bennet Burleigh, with something of Frederic Villiers and Melton Prior thrown in.

Others imagine us to be a group of feeble-minded young men who live at some mysterious place known as 'headquarters' where official information is served out to us by authority : which information, in transmission, we colour with our own ignoble prejudices—chiefly to the detriment of whatever regiment or unit the drawer of the picture may be most interested in. The only material detail on which the two pictures are substantially in accord is the fact of our extreme youthfulness, with its consequent inexperience.

There are at present five accredited Correspondents of the British Press with the British Armies in France, four of whom represent each two daily newspapers,¹ the fifth being Reuter's representative. The average age of the five is forty-seven years. We are considerably older than the general run of Brigadiers now serving at the Front, and, at a hazard, I conjecture that we come near to being senior to Major-Generals. That we have not the hard-won military knowledge of the professional soldier is cheerfully admitted, for only one of us has had even a Militia

¹ There are also two American Correspondents who share quarters with the British, as well as two Canadians, one Australian, one New Zealander (each with their respective forces), and a 'camp' or party of representatives of the Press of our Continental Allies, which normally includes four or five Frenchmen and, perhaps, one Belgian, one Italian, one Portuguese, though the composition of the 'camp' varies from time to time. The Correspondent of the *Daily Mail*, it should be added, represents no other journal, the *Standard*, which was originally yoked with the *Daily Mail*, being dead.

training; but, setting any previous experiences aside, we have in the aggregate seen vastly more of this War than any soldier living.

We have all, I think, been more or less mixed up with the fighting since the summer of 1914. We were in the early campaigning in Belgium, went through the bombardment of Antwerp and escaped on foot over the Dutch frontier, or waited in Ghent, to slip out as the Germans entered. Other of us were with the French or British troops—suffering periodical arrest at the hands of one or the other—from the Marne to the Yser. Some spent the year 1915 in Serbia or Gallipoli. Others stayed here through all those long days of trial, having become ‘honest women’ now, furnished with credentials which gave them ‘the status of officers’ (whatever that may mean) and secured immunity from intermittent arrest.

Since early in 1916 the present five have been continuously together, except for intervals of leave or reliefs on account of illness. No fighting soldier has seen so many aspects of the War as we. Not one of us would for a moment match his experience against that of any man who has spent one week in the front-line trenches. All our service does not compare with the honour of any Private who has once helped to repel a midnight raid or has ‘gone over’ with his comrades in the dawn. But we are getting a little touchy at the comments of writers at home, probably much our juniors, on the subject of our youth and our inexperience of war.

Two immense advantages we have as critics and as judges of the situation. First, we are continually in contact with men and officers of all ranks and every branch of the Service. Second, among ourselves, our knowledge and experience are always pooled.

The days when War Correspondents raced fifty miles from the scene of some savage skirmish to a telegraph office are gone. The Front here is so vast that no single man can possibly be in touch with all of it. We soon decided for ourselves that, so far as the imparting of facts was concerned, we must collaborate and work in harmony, each exchanging daily his news with all the others.

The substantial agreement of our despatches on all points of interest has not infrequently been cited as pointing to a suspicion that we all draw our news from some common and official source. This is quite untrue. If five men went to report a cricket match they would probably agree as to the result and as to the main incidents of the game; and it is difficult to understand why there should be less unanimity in regard to battles. The absence of conflict in the facts of our despatches

might more generously be cited as presumptive evidence in favour of their truth. But the fact is that each despatch is in a sense a work of collaboration. For the public good we have stifled that primitive instinct of the journalist to 'beat' the other man, and our ordinary method of working is as follows:

To the seven Correspondents (including two Americans) are attached five Press Officers. We have five motor cars and one lorry, as well as three Despatch Riders, with motor bicycles, which last, however, do not live at the 'camp.' Without them, however, including chauffeurs and orderlies, the 'camp' numbers some twenty-six or twenty-seven persons and, with the vehicles, makes an establishment of some size.

The function of the Press Officers is, first, to censor our despatches and, second, to accompany us wherever we may go. We go nowhere unchaperoned, unless it be to lunch or dine with a friend. There is absolutely no restriction on our movements. We walk—or motor—where we will, but, lamblike, a Press Officer comes too. This careful tending of our footsteps is understood to have been instituted from some fear in military bosoms, in the days when Correspondents were regarded as wild and scandalous people, that if we went unshepherded we might do fearsome things and commit unheard-of breaches of Army etiquette. People might even talk to us indiscreetly. That all seems very silly now and in practice it works out to our advantage. We always have a pleasant companion; and it is the Press Officer who must go in first to Army, Corps, Division, Brigade, or Battalion Headquarters and interrupt somebody's work before we are introduced. The drawback is that whenever we go under shell-fire or into unpleasant places the Press Officers must come with us. They do it with excellent grace and more zest than one might expect from men who have to risk their lives to appease another man's curiosity. The chauffeur we can leave a mile or two behind us on the road (where he sometimes has a more dangerous time than we), but the Press Officer must thread the shell-holes and slimy trenches with us to the bitter end and back.

In times of quiet we make headquarters in some château or country house so centrally situated as to be as close as possible to all parts of the line where active operations are likely to take place. This implies that we must be some distance from all parts of it. You cannot be close up to any point on a Front of a hundred miles without cutting yourself off entirely from some other points; and the only thing to do is to place ourselves at some reasonably central point whence, in an hour and a half or two hours by motor car, we can reach any part of the line from the Somme to the sea. When active operations are impending

on any scale in some particular section we move up to temporary advanced headquarters in that neighbourhood. It is still useless to be too near the line—as useless as it would be for the Commander-in-Chief—or we would cut ourselves off from others, as well as losing touch with the telegraphic base. So during the Battle of the Somme we made our home in Amiens, whence it was possible to reach any part of the line, from before Thiepval to Fricourt, in forty minutes or an hour. To the Battle of Arras our permanent headquarters were close enough. It might be more convenient to be closer to the actual front line, but such convenience would be bought at sacrifice of nearness to General Headquarters and to the telegraph.

We are nowadays well informed of impending operations; and on the eve of a great attack we decide among ourselves which will be the best point of view from which to see it. That will depend entirely on local topography. I have watched attacks from less than four hundred yards away, ensconced in an Artillery Observation Post in a handy hillside. Others one has had to be content to watch from no nearer than a couple of miles. According as the front of attack is wide or narrow, and as favourable points of observation are many or few, we may all assemble—probably in pitch darkness—at one place; or we may scatter to three or four different positions. However that may be, we have already divided by lot the sections of the Front between us, and each Correspondent is charged with the duty of gathering the news from, probably, the area of one Corps. And long experience has brought us to agreement on the best way in which this can be done.

As soon as the attack has gone forward and there is nothing more to be seen from the observation point we push up, each one in a car accompanied by a Press Officer, as far as may be advantageous on the road towards the fighting, where we can meet the walking wounded as they come down to the dressing station, and see prisoners arriving at the ‘cages,’ or otherwise absorb as much as may be of the atmosphere of the battle. Each man on his homeward way then calls at his proper Army or Corps Headquarters and learns there the latest official news from the battlefield.

Attacks now are generally delivered at dawn or soon thereafter, which, according to the time of year, may be at half-past two or six o’clock. In any case we meet at our own headquarters at an appointed time—generally one o’clock—and there exchange our notes. All that each man has learned is common property: each in rotation telling his story generally from north to south of the battle-line. That done, we then have some two hours or two hours and a half in which to write our despatches so that

they may be censored and telegraphed in time for the next morning's papers.

On the second day of a great attack we visit smaller units or go up to the battlefield. Experience has shown that, so far as personal safety is concerned, the sooner one goes up behind our men the less the chance of being killed, for the enemy's artillery is then too busy with what is going on in front to make itself too unpleasant in back areas; and the rough survey of the battle pieced together from our joint store of knowledge on the first day can be filled out with individual narratives and touches of eyewitness description of the field on the second and following days.

It has taken us some time to organise this system, which may yet be capable of vast improvement. Each one of us is of course plunged daily into renewed despair over the inadequacy of his work; but so immense and complicated is the machinery of modern battle, and so difficult is it to get prompt news back from the front line to the base, that only by some such system of co-operation is it possible for us to give approximately accurate and comprehensive accounts of a whole operation. And it has one transcendent advantage. I do not believe that ever before has the public come so near to getting the full truth from the battlefield. The danger which besets all War Correspondents, when operating individually, is that they will give way to the temptation to embroider their accounts, adding trimmings of imagination to the facts, and using conjecture to supply deficiencies in things which they have not seen. No correspondent can do that here. We do not all see the same facts alike, for each views things through the medium of his own temperament; and I have personally failed to recognise the printed account of an incident, seen by us in common, as written by another Correspondent more talented than myself. But the reader can rest assured that whatever he reads of news from the Western Front is, with reservations to be explained hereafter, as near the truth as the individual writer can set it down. Of purposeful 'faking' there is none; and I venture to believe that in the future it will be put to the credit of my colleagues here that by the conspiracy of honesty in which they have engaged they have set a very high standard for future War Correspondents to measure themselves by. In so far as we may fail to satisfy the public, it is by our inherent incapacity, not by any failing of honesty of purpose or of earnest endeavour.

Which inevitably brings me to the extremely delicate question of how far we are permitted to tell all the truth. There is, you know, a Censorship. The broad principles laid down to guide the Censorship are (1) that we must say nothing which will

give information or encouragement to the enemy; (2) that we must say nothing which will unduly depress our men; and (3) that we must not criticise the conduct of our military operations. With the wisdom of all these rules we heartily agree, and between us and the large principles of the Censorship as now laid down there is no room for quarrel.

The subject on which opinions clash most frequently is that of mentioning units of British troops by name. Everybody is agreed on the desirability of giving the names—Warwicks, Manchesters, Suffolks, and so forth—whenever possible; but the one final and compelling consideration is that, in doing so, no information which he does not already possess must be furnished to the enemy. How much information does he possess? Our Intelligence Department keeps extraordinarily accurate record of the movements of German Divisions; and documents continually fall into our hands which forbid us to regard the German intelligence as wholly incompetent. But until documentary evidence of the fact is forthcoming, or until we have lost prisoners from a particular Division, how are we to know whether the enemy is aware of its presence in the line or not? Even if he knew that it was there three days ago, may he not be in doubt whether it has since been moved?

Often a single regiment—as Manchesters or Royal Fusiliers—can be mentioned fearlessly, because it has many battalions scattered in numerous Divisions. The naming of one then tells nothing. But the mentioning of two neighbouring battalions is more difficult, for that particular combination may exist in one Division only. Yet the honours may be so evenly divided that to give credit to one and be silent about the other would be gross injustice. There is no Correspondent who does not seek eagerly for every opportunity to mention individual troops by name. We have no more wish to help the enemy than has the General Staff. But the immediate question of whether particular troops can be named or not is often one of obvious delicacy about which there may well be legitimate difference of opinion. And it is the censoring officer who must decide. It is a thankless office. If he excises the name there awaits him the indignant remonstrance of the Correspondent who has not written without first satisfying himself that the thing is harmless. If he leaves it in and it should thereafter appear that the Germans had thereby been enabled to place a Division, his official head would probably be called for as a sacrifice. It is natural that the latter should be the more coercive argument. So many a regiment to which the Correspondent had striven to do justice has appeared in print as 'troops upon the left of the attack' or simply as 'our men.'

Akin to this difficulty is that of the mentioning of Overseas troops. A large part of the British public evidently believes that all Correspondents are in conspiracy to glorify Australians and Canadians at the expense of the soldiers from the British Isles. It is a preposterous notion. The obvious fact is this:

The Australians and Canadians always fight in units of a Corps, the former sometimes having two Corps in the line together. An attack may be delivered on a frontage of three Corps, of which, perhaps, the centre Corps is Australian and those on either side are composed of troops from the British Isles, each Corps having two Divisions in the line. The Australian two Divisions—comprising twenty-four battalions—are *all Australian*; while on each side of them are two Divisions made up of twenty-four battalions drawn from as many different regiments. Supposing six hundred men of each battalion in all Divisions to go into action, there will be engaged six hundred only of Devons, or Cheshire, or Black Watch, but there will be nearly fifteen thousand Australians.

It will be readily understood, in the first place, that the concealment of the presence of a Corps of Australians in the line is very difficult. The battalion of Devons, of Cheshire, of Black Watch, may easily be unknown to the German, or the identity of that particular Division. But he is never long in ignorance when an Australian or Canadian Corps has 'taken over.' These latter, then, can generally be spoken of with certainty of no harm being done. One cannot assume the same of the individual battalion of Home troops.

Moreover, it is evident that six hundred men, however gallant, cannot play as large a part in any fight as can fifteen thousand. Not only can the Australians be mentioned freely, but, being twenty-four times as numerous, they ought to be mentioned twenty-four times as often as any individual battalion on their left or right. We can only speak of the Corps to right or left being composed of 'English troops' or of 'Scottish, Irish, and Welsh units.' We are aware that that pleases nobody. But shall we, then, mention all the forty-eight battalions *seriatim* and make the enemy a present of our whole battle order? Three or four battalions of the forty-eight—one, perhaps, from each Division—can generally be named with safety, and that is what we commonly do. In each section of the battlefield some one battalion has usually signalled itself beyond all others, either by the accident of having the most difficult positions to carry or by some especially brilliant piece of work. We strive to tell the story of that achievement so as to do the least injustice to the forty other battalions, the gallantry of which must go unsung.

No Correspondent can have been here and seen these last two summers' fighting without being filled with abiding admiration

of and wonder at the quality of our Home troops. I sometimes feel that in my own despatches I grow ridiculous in trying to praise them enough. But they cannot be praised enough, and some day every regiment will surely come by its share of the glory. Meanwhile, one wishes that people at Home would consider how absurd is the supposition that any Correspondent should wish to do otherwise than celebrate the achievements of every regiment to the limit of his opportunity, and would recognise that there are good reasons why every battalion cannot be mentioned and what those reasons are.

The pressure to speak more freely of individual units has, one conjectures, been as great upon the military authorities as it has upon ourselves; and in the course of the last autumn official *communiqués* have sometimes bristled with the names of units. On more than one occasion the Correspondents have wondered whether the limit of prudence was not being passed, for with very little ingenuity the enemy might, from the official *communiqué* alone, have practically reconstructed our whole battle-line. The military authorities have doubtless had to weigh the disadvantages of giving information to the enemy against the perils of resisting the demands from Home. My own opinion is that the solution of the difficulty could be found if the War Office would (1) co-operate with the Press in making the public understand how cogent is the necessity for temporary reticence, and (2) take the proper steps to see that the share of every unit in any operation should be given all publicity as soon as the passage of time made such publicity safe. The daily Press, I think, would gladly find space, every day if need be, for a paragraph telling the gallantry of men of some one regiment; and by now the achievement of every unit, not only on the Somme but in the Battles of Arras and Messines, might have been given to the world.

The opinion has been expressed above that never before has the public come so near to getting the full truth from the battle-field. The difficulty, of course, is in speaking of our failures. The world has seen from the German *communiqués* how easy it is to be truthful when you are winning and how fatally difficult when you lose. The same mind in Berlin presumably dictates the minutely veracious narrative of a victory in Italy and the distressing prevarications used to conceal defeat in Flanders which appear, perhaps, on the same day.

We have misgivings as to how much liberty would be permitted us in case of any great reverse befalling our arms, for there is no overwhelming evidence that the Army has yet become convinced of the greatness of truth and the certainty that it will prevail, even in disaster. Happily, the matter has not been put

to the test, for while, since the beginning of the Battle of the Somme, not all our attacks have met with equally complete success there has been nothing approaching a great reverse.

In the early days of the Somme, on an occasion when our attack had succeeded at six points and failed at the seventh, some of the Correspondents were told that they need say nothing about the point of failure. We took the liberty of disregarding the suggestion and put the tale of failure in the forefront of our several despatches, then wiping out the stain of it in the glory of our success. The officer who had spoken to us complimented us afterwards on the excellence of our narratives; and the point has not been raised again. But the difficulty remains.

We must say nothing which will encourage the enemy or unduly depress our troops—or, presumably, the nation at home. I think the Army overrates the likelihood of depressing either the troops or the nation. Nothing could shake the *moral* of men who go unshaken through what our men face here. And so well do they fight that there could be nothing shameful for the nation's reading in a truthful tale of any reverse which they might suffer. So far as the men themselves, the people at home, or the world at large are concerned, it would undoubtedly be best to tell in detail of every minor reverse which we suffer; but then intrudes the question of how far we should give encouragement to the enemy.

There is no doubt that we all believe that it heartens our men and our people to read how this or that German battery or regiment has been wiped out. When we have attacked with twenty battalions, fifteen of which have gained every objective with light losses, while of the remaining five, held up at some impregnable position, one in particular, caught between cross-fire of machine guns, has suffered horribly—shall we dwell upon the details of that slaughter? We know that, if we do, those sentences in our despatches, and those only, will be snatched from their context and blazoned through the world by the German press and German wireless and furnished, in translation, as is the enemy's habit, to all his troops in the line. It seems as if, in spite of the magnitude of truth, there must be some point at which we should hold our hands.

The whole tale of our fighting on the Somme, at Arras, at Messines and in Flanders has been so glorious that we could well afford, if only to heighten the splendour of the victories, to confess to every minor failure. The British public and the world are shrewd enough to know that there must be fluctuations, some taking as well as giving in war, and it is the foam and these swirls and eddies made by obstructions in its course which tell of the strength of a river's current. No Correspondent, I

am certain, has ever claimed complete success for an operation which partially failed. None has ever hesitated to say when the face of victory was clouded. But, left to ourselves, we would certainly use more freedom in treating of our minor reverses than we are permitted to use, and we believe that, had we done so, the world would by now have arrived at a juster appreciation of the magnificence of the work that has been done by Sir Douglas Haig and his armies, and would have come nearer than the bulk of public opinion has yet come to measuring our victories at their true importance.

Official timidity also interferes with us in another curious and nearly opposite way. It is not permitted to us to tell in detail the full story of a day's success lest we should lose some part of the ground won before to-morrow. We knew that Passchendaele had been captured in the early morning, but were not allowed to say so lest it should be lost again by counter-attack. The official *communiqué* announced its capture that same night (the *communiqué* being written some five or six hours after our despatches had been sent), and, as our messages all told the tale of victory as plainly as they could without actual use of the word 'capture' or explicit statement that we were in possession of the place, no especial harm was done; but our despatches, if they had been permitted to speak plainly, would have made much better and more convincing reading. Not then only, but many times besides, the 'propagandist' value of our victories has been immensely lessened by the indefiniteness with which we have been obliged to clothe our statements.

The one lesson which a journalistic training teaches beyond all others is that of the ultimate invincibility of the truth. It is hardly to be expected that in training for war—wherein secrecy and the deceiving of the enemy necessarily play so large a part—the same lesson should be taught with anything like equal force. The question of what kind of information will help the enemy (perhaps, even, what kind of writing will strengthen or encourage him) is a purely military question on which the judgment of the Army must be final. But the effect of the printed word on our own people, on the world at large, and even on the men in the Army itself, is a matter on which the Correspondents are infinitely better judges than the Army can ever be. For the military authorities to tell us how to frame our despatches so as to obtain a certain effect on the readers' minds is as purely absurd as it would be for me to tell an Artillery officer how to use his gun to destroy a given position.

As for the effect to be produced by our despatches, we are all at one. There can be but one common aim: namely, to help to win the War; and the Correspondents' part in it is, by making

plain the story of our achievements, to build up the nation's pride in the Army, and to strengthen the general *moral*. Nothing could do this more surely than would the literal detailed record of every day's achievement. Our despatches are already vastly more truthful, more comprehensively exact, than, I think, the public gives them credit for. I have indicated in what particulars there must chiefly be reading between the lines, namely that (1) we do not underline the inevitable mishaps which must befall some units of every victorious army, and (2) despatches on the first day of battle too often read half-heartedly, as if we had not full confidence in our success, because we are prohibited from explicitly claiming the capture of positions before that capture has been announced in the *communiqué*, by which time it is presumed that the possession of them is safe. It seems to us that it would be better to tell each day the full tale of the day's success and to leave the possible reverses of to-morrow for to-morrow's information.

Our relations with the Army are so pleasant, and the soldier's ancient prejudices against the Press are so nearly dead, that anything like complaint may seem ungracious. The conditions have immeasurably improved. But the Army has still some little way to travel in the directions, first, of understanding that nothing can ever be so powerful as the truth and, second, of trusting further to the discretion of Correspondents who know the use of the weapons which they wield much better than the Army can ever teach them. I have no doubt whatever that even this will be accomplished.

H. PERRY ROBINSON.

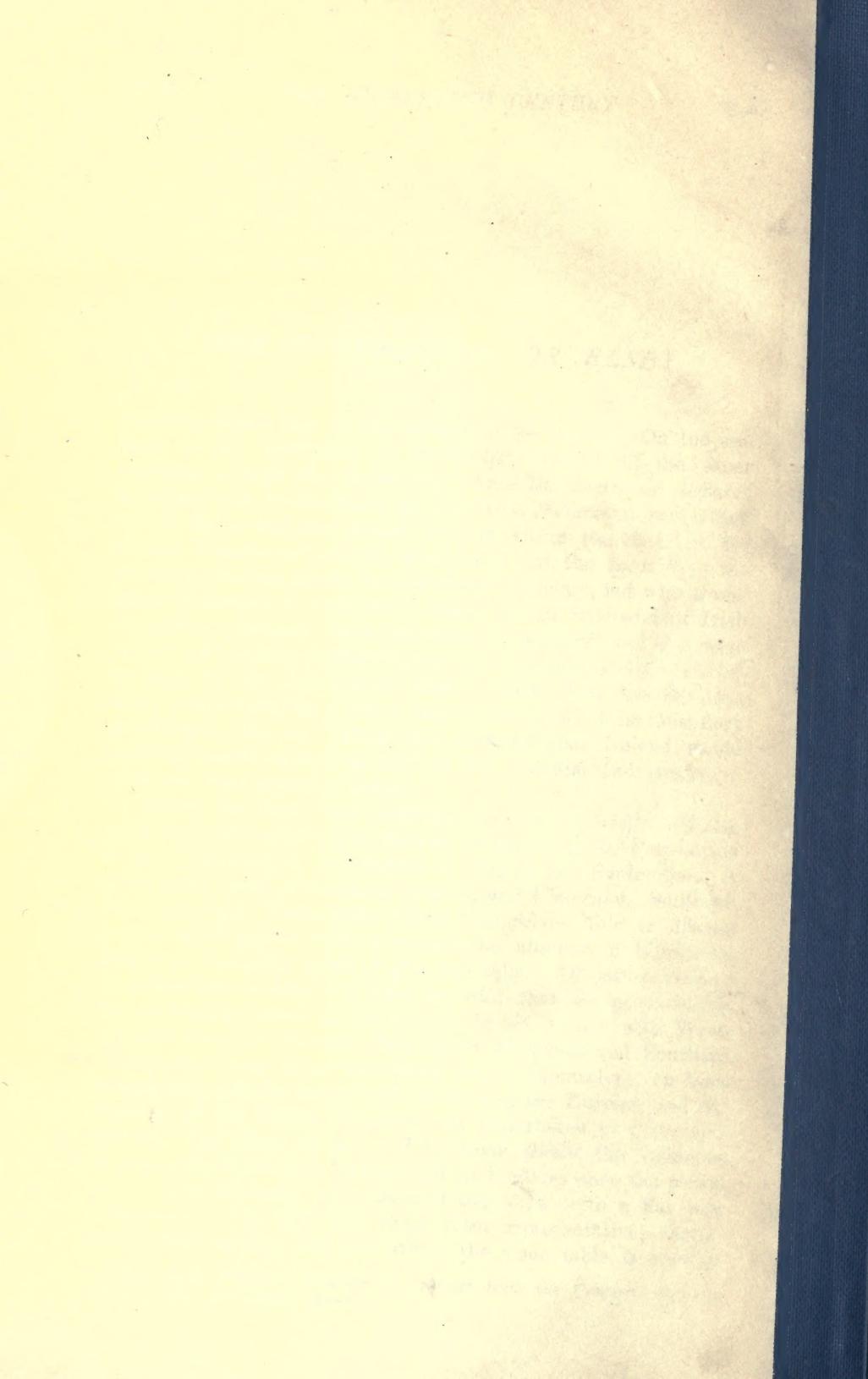
(Correspondent of *The Times* with the British
Armies in France.)

THE CONVENTION, OR ELSE?

IRELAND stands now at the parting of the ways. On the one hand is the Convention to which have rallied all the saner elements of Irish life, concerning which Mr. Redmond declares he wishes that it constituted the first Irish Parliament, and which stands for a free and united Ireland within the circle of the British Dominions; on the other hand are the Sinn Fein extremists, who can hardly be said to have a policy, but who at one moment came out with the demand for an independent Irish Republic, a demand which can never be granted, and if it were would split Ireland asunder from top to bottom, and be resisted in arms by the loyalists of Ulster. Sinn Fein however has lately reconsidered its position, and by the mouth of its most fiery protagonist, Mr. de Valera, has declared that Ireland would overwhelmingly accept an offer of full Colonial Independence, whatever that precisely means.¹

Before the Sinn Fein agitation reached its height nothing could have seemed brighter than the prospects of the Convention as they appeared in the months of August and September. A remarkable spirit of harmony existed, and Ulstermen, Southern Unionists, and Nationalists found themselves able to discuss controversial points with a remarkable absence of bitterness, and in a reasonable spirit of give and take. All parties seemed to realise that Ireland was upon her trial, that the responsibility for continuing unrest in the country would lie not with Westminster but with Dublin. Let Ulster Unionists and Southern Nationalists come to an agreement among themselves, on lines compatible with the safety and interests of the Empire, and the Premier of the United Kingdom has undertaken to give their decision the effect of law. This alone shows the immense distance which has been traversed in Irish affairs since the period when Irish demands were received too often with a flat *non possumus*. The fact that these Irish representatives should have come together and met round the same table is another

¹ See *Daily Mail* of November 10, extract from the *Connacht Tribune* report of Mr. de Valera's speech.



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